

MARY ROBINETTE KOWAL



FIRST FLIGHT

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illustration by

PASCAL MILELLI

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Eleanor Louise Jackson stood inside the plain steel box of the time machine. It was about the size of an outhouse, but without a bench or windows. She clutched her cane with one hand and her handbag with the other. It felt like the scan was taking far too long, but she was fairly certain that was her nerves talking.

Her corset made her ribs creak with every breath. She'd expected to hate wearing the thing, but there was a certain comfort from having something to support her back and give her a shape more like a woman than a sack of potatoes.

A gust of air puffed around her and the steel box was gone. She stood in a patch of tall grass under an October morning sky. The caravan of scientists, technicians and reporters had vanished from the field where they'd set up camp. Louise inhaled with wonder that the time machine had worked. Assuming that this was 1905, of course—the year of her birth and the bottom limit to her time-traveling range. Even with all the preparations for this trip, it baffled her sense of the order of things to be standing there.

The air tasted sweet and so pure that she could make out individual fragrances: the hard edge of oak mixed with the raw green of fresh mowed grass. Louise had thought her sense of smell had gotten worse because she'd gotten old.

She drew herself together and pulled the watch from the chain around her neck to check the time, as if it would reflect the local time instead of the time she'd left. 8:30 on the dot, which looked about right judging by the light. Now, she had six hours before they spun the machine back down and she got returned to her present. If the Board of Directors had thought she could do everything faster, they would have sent her back for less time because it was expensive to keep the machine spun up, but even with all the physical therapy, Louise was still well over a hundred.

With that in mind, she headed for the road. She'd been walking the route from the box to Huffman Prairie for the last week so they could get the timing on it. But this looked nothing like her present. There had been a housing development across the street from where she'd left and now there

was a farm with a single tall white house sitting smack in the middle of the corn fields.

If she thought too much about it, she wasn't sure she'd have the nerve to keep going. Down the road, a wagon drawn by a bay horse came towards her. Besides the fellow driving it, the back of the wagon was crammed full of pigs that were squealing loud enough to be heard from here. It made her think of her husband, dead these long years or two years old, depending on how you counted it. She shook her head to get rid of that thought.

Louise patted her wig, though the makeup fellow had done a lovely job fixing it to her head. She'd had short hair since the 1940s, and it felt strange to have that much weight on top of her head again. The white hair wound around her head in the style she remembered her own grandmother wearing. She checked to make sure her broad hat was settled and that the brooch masking the "hat-cam" was still pointing forward.

She hadn't got far when the wagon pulled up alongside her.

"Pardon, ma'am." The boy driving it couldn't be more than thirteen with red hair like a snarl of yarn. He had a heavy array of freckles and his two front teeth stuck out past his lip. He had a nice smile for all that.

"Seeing as how we're going the same way, might I offer you a ride?"

He had a book in his lap, like he'd been reading as he was driving. The stink of the pigs billowed around them with the wind. One of the sows gave a particularly loud squeal and Louise glanced back involuntarily.

The boy looked over his shoulder. "My charges are garrulous this morning." He patted the book in his lap and leaned toward her. "I'm pretending they're Odysseus's men and that helps some."

Louise couldn't help but chuckle at the boy's elevated language. "My husband was a hog farmer. He always said a pig talked more sense than a politician."

"Politicians or sailors. If you don't mind sharing a ride with them I'll be happy to offer it."

"Well now, that's kind of you. I'm on my way to Huffman Prairie."

He slid over on the bench and stuck his hand out to offer her a boost up. "I'm Homer Van Loon."

Well, that accounted for his taste in reading and vocabulary. Boys his age were more like to read the penny dreadfuls than anything else, but anyone whose parents saddled him with a name like Homer was bound to be a bit odd.

“Pleased to make your acquaintance. I’m Louise Jackson.” She passed him her cane and gripped his other hand. Holding that and the weathered wooden side of the wagon, she hauled herself aboard. Grunting in the sort of way that would have made her mama scold her, Louise dropped onto the wooden bench. Three months of physical therapy to get ready for this, and climbing into a wagon almost wore her out.

“You walk all the way out here from town?” Homer picked up the reins and sat next to her.

“Lands, no.” Louise settled her bag in her lap and told the lie the team of historians had prepared for her, in case someone asked. “I took the interurban rail out and then thought I’d walk the rest for a constitutional. The way was a bit longer than I thought, so I’m grateful to you.” The Lord would forgive her for the lie, given the circumstance.

“Are you headed out to the Wright Brothers’?”

“I am. I never thought I’d see such a thing.”

“That’s for a certai—” His voice cut off.

Louise slammed hard against pavement. The wagon was gone. Power lines hung over her head and the acrid smell of asphalt stung her nose.

And smoke.

Shouting, half a dozen people ran toward her. Louise rolled over to her knees and looked around for her cane. It had landed on the road to her side, and she grabbed it to lever herself back to her feet.

Mr. Barnes was near the front of the people running toward her. The poor thing looked as if his heart would give out with worry, though Louise wasn’t sure if he was worried about her or his invention.

The young fellow who did her wig got to her first, and helped her to her feet. It seemed as if everyone was chorusing questions about if she was all right. Louise nodded and kept repeating that she was fine until Mr. Barnes arrived, red-faced and blowing like a racehorse.

Louise drew herself up as tall as she could. “What happened?”

“We blew a transformer.” Mr. Barnes gestured at one of the telephone poles, which had smoke billowing up from it. “Are you all right?” Up close, it was clear he was worried about her, and Louise chided herself for doubting him. He hadn’t been a thing but kind to her since the Time Travel Society recruited her.

“I’m fine. More worried about the boy I was talking to than anything else.”

That stopped all the conversation flat. The program director, Dr. Connelly, pushed her way through the crowd, face pale. “Someone saw you vanish? You’re sure?”

“I was sitting in his wagon.” Louise settled her hat on her head. “Maybe, if you send me back a few seconds after I vanished, we can pretend that I fell out of the wagon.”

“Out of the question.” Dr. Connelly set her mouth into a hard line. With her dark hair drawn tight in a bun, she looked like a school marm with an unruly child.

“He’ll think he’s gone crazy.”

“And having you reappear will make things better?”

“At least I can explain what’s happening so he’s not left wondering for the rest of his life.”

“Explain what? That you are a time traveler?”

Louise gripped her cane and took a step closer to Dr. Connelly. When she was young, she would have been able to look down at the woman, and still felt like she ought to, even though their eyes were on level. “That’s exactly what I’ll tell him. He’s a twelve-year-old boy reading Homer on his free time. I don’t think he’ll have a bit of a problem believing me.”

A muscle pulsed in Dr. Connelly’s jaw, and she finally said, “There’s no point in arguing out here in the heat. We’ll take it to the rest of board and let them decide.”

That was as clear a “no” as if she’d actually said the word. Louise leaned forward on her cane. “I look forward to speaking with them.” She cut Dr. Connelly off before she could open her mouth. “As I’m the only one

who's met the boy, I trust you'll want me to tell the Board about him." People shouldn't make the mistake of thinking that being old meant she was sweet.

* * *

Louise sat in her costume in a conference room with Dr. Connelly, Mr. Barnes, and two other members of the board, both white men who looked old but couldn't be much past retirement age. The conference room had flat-panel screens set up with the other board members on them. They had been debating the issues for the past half hour, largely going into details of why it was too dangerous to try to make her reappear on the wagon on account of it being a moving vehicle.

Louise cleared her throat. "Pardon me, but may I ask a question?"

"Of course." Mr. Barnes swiveled his chair to face her. The boy didn't seem that much older than Homer Van Loon for all that he'd invented the time machine.

"I hear you talking a lot about the program and I understand that's important and all, but I'm not hearing anyone talk about what's best for Homer Van Loon."

Dr. Connelly swiveled her chair to face Louise. "I appreciate your concern for the boy, but I don't think you have an understanding of the historical context of the issue."

Her disdain lay barely under the surface of civility. Louise had seen this sort of new money back when she'd been working in the department store, and she always had been required to smile at them. No need now.

"Young lady," Louise snapped at Dr. Connelly like one of her own children, "I've lived through two World Wars, the Great Depression, the Collapse. I lived through race riots, saw us put men on the moon, the Spanish Flu, AIDS, the Titanic, Suffrage and the Internet. I've raised five children and buried two, got twenty-three grandchildren, eleven great-grandchildren and five great-great-grandchildren with more on the way. And you have the nerve to say I don't understand history?"

The room was silent except for the whir of the computer fans.

Dr. Connelly said, “I apologize if we’ve made you feel slighted, Louise. We’ll take your concerns under advisement as we continue our deliberations.”

If she hadn’t been a good Christian woman, she would have cracked the woman on the head with her cane for the amount of condescension in her voice.

“How many people do you have that are my age?” She knew the answer to the question before she asked it. She might not use the Internet but she had grandchildren who were only too happy to do searches for her. A person couldn’t travel back before she was born, and Louise was born in 1905. There weren’t that many people of her age, let alone able-bodied ones.

“Six.” Dr. Connelly looked flatly unimpressed with Louise’s longevity.

Mr. Barnes either didn’t know where she was headed or agreed with her. “But you’re the only one that’s a native English speaker.”

Louise nodded her head in appreciation. “So it seems to me that you might want to do more than keep my concerns ‘under consideration.’”

A man on one of the screens spoke. “Are you blackmailing us, Mrs. Jackson?”

“No sir, I’m not. I’m trying to get you to pay attention.” She straightened in her chair now that they were all looking at her. “You saw the video of me meeting him. Homer Van Loon is a boy out of time himself. He’s reading the *Odyssey*, which if you know anything about farm boys from 1905 ought to tell you everything you need to know right there. Not only will he believe me, he’ll understand why it needs to be kept secret—as if anyone would believe him anyhow. And if you think on it, having someone local to the time might be handy. He’s twelve now. When you send someone back to Black Friday, which you will I expect, he’ll be in his thirties. You think a man like that wouldn’t be helpful?”

Mr. Barnes shook his head. “But we researched him today. His life was entirely unremarkable. If he knew you were a time traveler, wouldn’t that show up?”

Louise took a breath to calm herself. “If he’s told to keep it a secret, and does, do you think his history would look any different?”

One of the board members in the room, a lean man with wire-rim glasses, spoke for the first time. “You’ve convinced me.”

“Gerald!” Dr. Connally swiveled to glare at him. “Conversations with a pig farmer are not what our investors have paid for.”

And that was the real point that they had been dancing around in her presence. “I can do both.”

They stared at her again, but she only looked at Mr. Barnes. “Can’t I? There’s no reason I can’t go back to the same time twice, is there?”

He shook his head, slowly smiling. Oh, but he was completely on her side, wasn’t he. Louise beamed at him.

“Well, then, why don’t you send me back for twenty minutes to talk to Homer to see how he took it. Twenty minutes. That’s all and then I’ll come back to the present and tell you how the conversation went. If Homer believes me, then I can hop back to the same spot and he can give me a ride to Huffman Prairie. I’ll get there about the same time as I would have walking. If it doesn’t, then you can send me to the B point and we’ll have tried.”

Slowly in the screens heads began to nod. Dr. Connally scowled and threw her hands up. “That’s two set-ups. Do you people know how much that costs? Just the transformer delay is cutting into our return. I can’t conscience this. We’re contracted to deliver footage of the Wright Flyer III, and you, madam, are contracted to do that for us.” She pointed at Mr. Barnes. “If she can go to the same time place twice, then send her to the same place she went today, but after she met the boy. We’d built in extra time for the walk, right?”

Louise prayed that the Good Lord would grant her patience and give her strength to forgive this woman. And then Louise added a prayer that He would forgive her for being devious. “That should be fine.”

Mr. Barnes shook his head. “He’ll still be there unless we send you too late to get to the field.”

Never in her life had Louise wished for someone to lie, but she was beside herself wanting Mr. Barnes to be quiet. She was hoping that Homer had stuck around; in fact, she was counting on it so she could explain things to him.

Dr. Connelly rolled her eyes. "Not you too. You haven't even met the boy."

"No, but on the video he reminds me a lot of myself and, well, I'd still be there." Mr. Barnes shrugged. "Can you imagine being twelve and seeing someone vanish?"

"Anyone with sense would high-tail it out of there so whatever got her wouldn't get them, too." Dr. Connelly rolled her shoulders with blatant aggravation. "All right. Let's say he's more like you and still there. Send her back earlier so she can clear the site before the boy comes along. How much extra time will you need?"

The teeth Louise had left all hurt to answer civilly. "It doesn't take me but thirty minutes to get down the road to Huffman Prairie."

Dr. Connelly narrowed her eyes. "I trust that you won't try to wait and contact the boy instead of performing your contractual obligations.

Louise sucked in her dentures and set her jaw before answering. "I said I'd get you photos of that Wright Flyer and I plan to do so."

"That's not the same. I'll need your word, Louise."

"Dr. Connelly. You have my word that I will not wait for Homer. But I want you to understand that I think this is a terrible thing."

"Noted." She turned her attention to Mr. Barnes. "Given the trial runs, what's the shortest amount of time she'll need to be out of sight?"

"There's a bend in the road that she should reach in about ten minutes."

"Let's set her down fifteen minutes early, then." She surveyed the board. "Unless there are objections?"

Nobody but Louise seemed to care, and she kept her mouth shut before she could say something not very Christian.

* * *

When the steel booth vanished this time, the field looked exactly as it had before, save that the sun hadn't risen quite as high in the sky. The dust kicked up around her shoes as she walked, and it smelled of the mud pies she used to make as a child. She passed the knotted fence about where Homer had picked her up and kept on to where she thought they been when she vanished. The trees came down almost to the edge of the road and made a place to hide. Oh, but wasn't she tempted to turn off and rest, waiting for Homer to turn up. There was even a natural bench where a tree had fallen.

But even if she hadn't given her word, they'd know if she waited because of that hat-cam. There was nothing to do but to get the photos fast enough so she could come back and talk to Homer before the plane flew. That wasn't supposed to happen until eleven o'clock, which should give her plenty of time.

She got to the bend in the road and looked back to see if Homer's wagon was in sight, but didn't see a sign of him yet. Louise headed on to Huffman Prairie and felt every year of her life as she walked. Dust coated her shoes and the hem of her dress by the time she reached the field. A trickle of sweat crept between her scalp and the wig, driving her crazy with its slow progress across her skin.

The hanger in the middle of the field was in worse shape than it was in her present. Some historical society had built a replica of the rough structure, but it bore little resemblance to the original. She dug into her handbag and pulled out a pair of opera glasses. Thumbing the switch, she turned on the high-definition digital camera embedded inside the case and began filming the barn and surrounding field. Sun cut across the field, weaving in and out of the tall grass like a child playing hide and seek. Across the way, a group of men in suits and ties were carrying the Wright Flyer III to the single rail track next to the hangar. The catapult tower stood in front of them, waiting to hurl the flyer down the rail and into the air.

Louise lowered the opera glasses. Well now, she hadn't expected them to start moving it so early, so maybe Dr. Connelly had a point after all.

She'd seen photos of the plane, of course, but until this moment the reality of time travel hadn't hit her. She recognized the Wright Brothers like

they were her own family. The fellow down at the end with the handlebar mustache, that was Orville. And over there, with the bright blue eyes, was Wilbur, covering his bald head with a bowler, even while he was working.

And then there was the plane. It was like a child's model made large. A wood and cloth construction that was equal parts grace and lumbering ox. Looking at it, it was hard to believe that it would roll down the track, much less fly for half an hour. Louise raised the opera glasses to her eyes and filmed the men settle the plane on the track. They milled around then, while Orville Wright did something with the one wheel trolley underneath.

She checked her watch. 8:45, which was about when she'd vanished on the first trip. There was two hours yet before the flight was going to happen. She'd need to hurry and snap the photo of that gear they wanted and then hurry down the road to meet Homer. There ought to be more than enough time to get down the road to Homer and be back for the flight.

The board had their mission and she had hers. Tucking the opera glasses back into her bag, Louise made her way across the field. She wanted to run, but the uneven ground would cause her to stumble if she stepped out of walking pace.

Wilbur looked up as she approached. From his face, she must make quite a picture. An old lady, in a fine plum walking suit, out by herself in a field full of men and machinery. Louise nodded her head. "Morning. I hope I'm not disturbing you."

"No ma'am." Wilbur pulled a rag out of his pocket and hastily wiped his grease stained fingers off. "Can I help you with anything?"

That was one of the handy things about being old, people were always wanting to help out. No telling if the people at the Time Travel Institute had thought of that or not. "I wanted to see what you gentlemen were doing out here. I've been reading about your efforts and they're inspiring, I'll tell you." Louise moved around the wing of the plane toward the rudders, where the missing part was. Or not missing. Since the plane was whole and perfect. She turned so her hat-cam was pointing straight at him, recording for posterity. "Please don't mind me. I'm just the nosy type."

“Um. Well. We’re getting ready for a trial flight, so if you don’t mind . . .”

“Oh, I’ll stand over on the side when you take off.” She lifted the glasses again and aimed them at the part, moving around to get it from a different angle.

He laughed. “I appreciate that ma’am. It’ll be another ten minutes or so.”

Louise gasped. The records showed that they took off at eleven and that was two hours from now.

“Something wrong ma’am?” His face was flushed and so alive that it was hard for Louise to credit that he’d been dead for close to seventy years where she came from.

“No, no. I didn’t realize how soon it was. Somehow I got it in my mind that you were going to fly later today.” This time travel was a marvel. Standing here as they fiddled with whatever it was on the airplane, it made her pity poor Mr. Barnes who couldn’t travel back more than thirty years. What had there been to see in his lifetime that was like this?

It made her wish she was a few years older so she could see their first flight. Louise worked her way around the plane, determined to film every inch of it. Did they know that it would break records today? “How long do you think you’ll fly today?”

He grinned and rubbed the back of his neck. “It’s good of you to think it’ll get off the ground, ma’am.”

Orville gave the wrench a twist on the gizmo. “The gentlemen are taking wagers so my brother doesn’t feel as if he can make predictions. It wouldn’t be ‘sporting.’” He lowered the tool and gestured at her with it. “How long do you think we’ll stay aloft?”

“Well now, I’m not a betting person, so I couldn’t say.” If truth be told, she knew exactly how long it would take. Eighteen minutes and forty-two seconds. In two days, they would do the flight everyone talked about, where the machine stayed aloft for thirty minutes. But this flight, today, marks the first time it will stay aloft for more than a few minutes. There were no records of it because no one knew that it would be a historic moment.

“Go on. We won’t write your name down,” one of the men said.

“No, thank you sir. It’d be betting in my heart, because I’d still be hoping I was right.” Louise smiled at him but he shifted uncomfortably and tugged on his collar. Well, if it made him think better of his ways, that was all to the good, even if it wasn’t why she’d traveled through time to get here.

After a few moments of uncomfortable silence, they got back to work and more or less ignored Louise, which suited her fine. She took pains to look at every inch of the flyer so no one at the Time Travel Institute could say she had neglected her duty when she went off after Homer.

Orville said, “Is there anything you’re looking for in particular?”

“Oh! No. Thank you. I’m fascinated.”

He grunted and lifted his head. “Wilbur! Would you get me the oilcan?” Orville jiggled a gizmo on the front of the plane. “I don’t like the way the elevator is responding.”

Nodding, Wilbur trotted over to the hangar while Orville continued to tweak the Flyer. “Wilbur’s a trusting sort.” He beckoned Louise closer. “The thing is, I don’t think we’ve ever had someone display so much interest in one of our flyers before, except industrial spies, of course.” He smiled at her, but his eyes were hard and narrow.

It hadn’t even occurred to her what it must look like for her to be staring at the plane with opera glasses. “I’d so wished I’d seen your first flight that I’m determined not to miss a thing about this one.” She put on her best sweet little old lady face and pointed at the rudder. “What does this do?”

Leaning in close to her, Orville kept his smile fixed. “It helps the flyer fly.”

Behind her, Louise heard the squeal of pigs. She lost all interest in Orville and turned as Homer came thundering up to the field, driving the wagon faster than was wise. He pulled the horse up in a cloud of dust. Standing, he pointed at her. “I thought so!”

“Excuse me, gentlemen.” Louise set her back to them and started walking across the field to meet Homer.

He half ran at her but stopped before he got near enough to touch. “Are you a witch?”

Back at the plane, one of the men muttered, “Well she’s old enough to be.”

Louise half-turned her head to him. “I’m old but there isn’t a thing wrong with my hearing.” She faced Homer again. “And I’m not a witch.”

“How do you explain disappearing and then turning up here?”

She shook her head. “Walk with me, young man, and I’ll explain.”

He crossed his arms. “Not a chance. I want witnesses to whatever you’re going to say. There’s no way that I’m going to let you take me off and enchant me.”

The snickers again from behind her. Louise sighed. “You want these gentlemen to think you’ve read too many penny-dreadfuls? Have you ever heard of witches outside of a storybook? Ever read about one in the papers? No. Because there’s no such thing.”

“That might be so, but I saw you disappear with my own two eyes and I ain’t taking any chances.”

“You took a chance coming here, didn’t you? If I’m what you say I am. What’s to stop me from vanishing right now and taking you with me if it were something I could do? So when I ask you to walk with me, I’d take it kindly if you would.”

“What have you got to say that you’re afraid to say in front of these folks?”

“Not a thing. I’m more worried about them thinking you’re any more touched than they already do.” She gestured toward the hanger. “I’m going to walk over there and you can come with me or not, as you like. I’ll keep at arm’s distance though, so you aren’t thinking I’ll grab you and haul you Lord knows where.” Without waiting for Homer to respond, she set out, stabbing the ground with her cane as she went. She figured that curiosity had brought him here and curiosity would make him follow her. Sure enough, she hadn’t got more than ten steps before she heard him coming along after.

She waited until she was fairly sure she was out of earshot of the men at the flyer, and then waited a mite more before she started talking. “You ever read H. G. Wells?”

“Of course I have.”

“Well, that’ll make things a little easier.” She stopped abruptly and turned to face him. Homer was almost on her heels and half-stumbled back to keep out of arm’s reach. Louise snorted. “Do you remember the book *The Time Machine*?”

Homer blinked and then guffawed. “You aren’t trying to tell me you’re from the future.”

“Being a witch is more believable?”

“Well. . . no offense, ma’am.” He dug his toe into the ground. “But a time traveler wouldn’t be old.”

“I wouldn’t have thought so either, but it turns out that time travel only works within the span of a person’s lifetime. They picked me because I was born this year.”

His face screwed up with concentration. “Let’s say that’s so. Give me a good reason for you to vanish, then.”

“The machine broke and I can only stay here for so long as it’s turned on. It took a full day for them to fix it while I was back in my own time.” She shook her head. “I told them to set me down near you so I could explain, but they thought you wouldn’t understand. I’m very sorry about that.”

“Prove it. Bring me tomorrow’s paper or something.” Those arms were crossed across his chest again as if he were preparing for war. At least Louise knew he’d survive the Great War, because the records they’d found about him showed Homer dying in the seventies.

“I can’t nip back and forth in time on a whim. It’s an expensive machine that’s sent me here, and the operator is back in my own time.” Louise pursed her lips, thinking. Dr. Connelly wouldn’t approve, but the only obviously modern thing she had with her was the opera glass camera. Pulling it out of her handbag, Louise rewound the footage a little so he

could watch it. "Here. This is a moving picture camera, disguised as opera glasses. I was filming the plane."

Homer started to reach for them, and then stopped. "What if this is just a story and that's ensorcelled?"

"Young man. I don't know why you're so set on me being a witch instead of a time traveler. Why on earth would I pretend to be something so unbelievable if I were trying to hide being a witch? It doesn't make a spot of sense. If I were going to make up a story, it'd be a cleverer one than that —unless I'm telling the truth. Now you tell me why I'd pretend to be a time traveler instead of letting you think I'm a witch?"

"There are laws against witchcraft. You could be burned at the stake."

She didn't say anything to that, just sighed and looked over the rim of her glasses at him. Living as long as she had gave her plenty of time to perfect the withering glare of scorn. She'd decimated sons and grandsons with it, and this boy melted as easily as the others. His face colored right out to the tips of his ears, which burned bright enough to serve as a landing beacon for the Flyer. He rocked back on his heels and raised his shoulders as if he were trying to protect his neck from the butcher's knife.

Swallowing, Homer said, "I guess that's not too likely."

"No. It's not. Now are you going to look at this or not?"

He took the opera glasses from her and held them up to his eyes. Immediately he yanked them away, eyes wide with shock. Spinning on his heel, he stared at the airplane. Homer brought the glasses up to his eyes, and even with his back to her, Louise could see his hands shaking. "What is this?"

"It's a camera."

"I mean, why are you taking all these pictures of the flyer?" He lowered the glasses, turning to face her.

"Because, today is the first day that they really fly. Wilbur will go up for eighteen minutes and not come down until he drains the gas tank. It's a historic moment, but they weren't expecting it, so there's no photographer here. Day after tomorrow, Orville will fly in front of a crowd for thirty-four minutes, but today's the day everything changes. And later on, after they fly

it, they'll make changes and eventually dismantle the flyer. In 1947 Orville will rebuild it for an exhibit, but he'll only have about sixty percent of this plane. There's a historical society that wants to check the rebuilt plane against this one."

And right then, Wilbur stepped out of the open door of the hangar. "This has gone on long enough. Madam, you should be ashamed of yourself, filling this boy's head with nonsense in order to get him to help in your espionage." He held out his hand to Homer. "Give me the camera, son."

"Espionage?" Louise lifted her cane so it served as a barrier between the man and Homer. "I don't know what you're talking about, but the opera glasses are mine and I'll thank you to leave them alone."

"I overheard everything, and though your story is designed to play upon the fancies of a boy, I could hear the elements of truth." He reached over the cane and snatched the opera glasses from Homer's hand.

"Hey!" Homer pushed Louise's cane out of the way and stepped toward the man. "Give that back."

"We've been at pains to keep our invention out of the wrong hands" He brushed past both of them and hurried across the field, waving the opera glasses.

Homer ran after him and caught his coat. "Please, Mr. Wright. I was just funning with her. I didn't think anyone would take me seriously."

Louise hurried after them, focused more on the uneven ground than the man in front of her.

Wilbur shrugged off Homer's hand and shook his head. "We didn't advertise this test flight, so how do you suppose that she knew to come out here today, except through spying?"

Louise laughed to hide her discomfiture. This was the sort of thing that it would have been nice for the Time Travel Society to let her know. "You can't think that people aren't talking about this in town, can you?"

"The people in town aren't out here snooping around. Who looks at things up close with *opera glasses*?" Wilbur lifted the opera glasses and mimed snooping.

The moment he looked through the opera glasses he cursed and jerked his head away from the eye piece. Slowly he put it back to his eyes. His face paled. Wilbur wiped his mouth, lowering the opera glasses to stare at Louise. “Who do you work for?”

“I’m just a woman that’s interested in seeing you fly.” She could barely breathe for fear of the moment. “You’re making history here.”

“History.” He snorted. “You were talking to the boy about time travel.”

Before Louise could think of a clean answer, Homer said, “She disappeared earlier. Utterly vanished. I . . . I think she’s telling the truth.”

“And if she is?” Wilbur turned the glasses over in his hands. “I look at this and all I can see are the number of inventions that stand between me and the ability to do. . . . If I weren’t holding it, I should think it impossible.”

Louise could not think of a thing to say to the man. He looked as if his faith had been as profoundly shaken as a small boy discovering the truth about Santa Claus. Louise shook her head. “All I want is to watch you fly; once I’ve done that I’ll be gone and you won’t have to worry about the pictures I took.”

“This is why you were so certain the Flyer will work today, isn’t it?” There was no wonder in his voice, only resignation.

“Yes, sir.”

“And what you told the boy, about Orville rebuilding the plane. True? So, we’ll be enough of a success that someone builds a museum and sends a time traveler back to visit. That’s something, even if I’m not around to see it.”

Startled, Louise replayed the things she had told Homer. “Why do you think that?”

“Because everything you said was about my brother. At some point, I’ll stop registering on the pages of history.” He twisted the glasses in his hands. “Is the future fixed?”

Louise hesitated. “The Good Book promises us free will.”

“You have not answered my question.” He took his bowler off and wiped a sheen of sweat from his scalp before settling it back in place.

When he looked back at her with eyes as blue as a frozen river, she could see the boy she'd read about. Self-taught and brilliant, he had been described as having a voracious mind. Everything she said would go in and fill his mind with ideas.

"You understand that I'm only a traveler and don't understand the science? If you think about time like a stalk of broccoli, what Mr. Barnes's machine does is it takes a slice of the broccoli and shuffles it to a different point in the stalk. My past is one big stalk. My future is made up of florets. So the only places I can travel back to are the ones that lead to the future I live in. If I tried to go forward, they tell me that the future will be different every time. Which I believe means that you can do things different and wind up in a different stalk of the broccoli, but I'll only ever see the pieces of broccoli that lead to my present." She shook her head. "If that makes any sense to you, then I'll be impressed."

"It makes sense enough." Wilbur lifted the glasses to his eyes again, and with them masked said, "I'll thank you not to intimate this to my brother."

"Of course not." Louise shuddered.

"Very good." Wilbur spun on his heel. "Well, find a spot to watch."

"But Miss Jackson's opera glasses . . ." Homer trotted after him.

"I'll give them back after I've flown." Wilbur Wright grinned. "If your history is going to lose track of me, then perhaps the future needs to be reminded."

* * *

On the far side of the hanger, the other men were still celebrating the flight. Eighteen minutes and forty-two seconds precisely. She'd recorded their joy, but whenever Wilbur looked at her, Louise got the shivers and had finally given up to wait out her remaining time out of sight. She leaned against the side of the hanger, studying her watch. Time was almost up.

At a run, Homer rounded the corner of the hanger with the opera glasses in his hands. He relaxed visibly at the sight of her. "I was scared you'd be gone already."

She held the watch up. "Two minutes."

"He didn't want to come. Said that the doubt would be better than knowing for certain." Homer chewed his lip and handed her the opera glasses. "What happens to him, Miss Jackson?"

Louise sighed and remembered all the things she'd read about Wilbur Wright before coming here. "He dies of typhoid when he's forty-seven. I do wish I hadn't said a thing about the future."

Homer shook his head. "I'm glad you told me. I'll—"

And he was gone.

The tall grass of Huffman Prairie was replaced by a crisply mown lawn of chemical green. Where the weathered hanger had been stood a bright, white replica. Neither the hanger nor the lawn seemed as real as the past. Louise sighed. The air burned her nostrils, smelling of carbon and rubber. The homing beacon in her handbag should bring them to her soon enough.

She leaned back against the barn to wait. A paper rustled behind her. She pulled away, afraid that she'd see a big "wet paint" sign, but it was an envelope.

An envelope with her name on it.

She spun around as quickly as she could, but there wasn't a soul in sight. Breath fighting with her corset, Louise pulled the envelope off the wall. She opened it carefully and found a single sheet of paper. A shaky hand covered the surface.

Dear Louise,

You will have just returned from your first time travel mission and meeting me, so this offers the first opportunity to introduce myself to you in your present. I wish I could be there, but that would mean living for another forty years, which task I fear would require Olympian blood. You have been such a friend to me and my family and so I wanted you to know two things.

*1. Telling me the truth was the best thing you could have done for me.
Thank you.*

2. *We are (or will be by the time you read this) major shareholders in the Time Travel Society. It ensures that your future trips to my past are without incident, and also will let my children know precisely when your first trip takes place in your present. I hope you don't mind that I took the liberty of asking my children to purchase shares for you as well. I wish we could have presented them to you sooner.*

Be well, my friend. And happy travels.

Sincerely yours,
Homer Van Loon

At the bottom of the sheet was a bank account number, and then a list of addresses and phone numbers arranged in order of date.

Her eyes misted over at the gift he'd given her—not the account, but the knowledge that she had not harmed him by telling the truth.

In the parking lot, the Time Travel Society's minivan pulled in, barely stopping before Mr. Barnes and the rest of the team jumped out. "How was the trip?" he shouted across the field, jogging toward her.

Louise smiled and held out the opera glasses. "I think you'll like the footage I got for you."

"May I?" He stopped in front of her, as long and lanky as she imagined Homer being when he was grown up.

"Of course. That's why you sent me, isn't it?"

He took the opera glasses from her and rewound. Holding it to his eyes as the rest of the team gathered around, Mr. Barnes became utterly still.

"Miss Jackson . . . Miss Jackson, how did you get the camera on the plane?"

Dr. Connelly gasped. "On the Wright Flyer?"

"Yes, ma'am. I watched from the ground with the hat-cam while Wilbur was flying. I'm quite curious to hear the audio that goes with it. We could hear him whooping from the ground."

"But how did you . . ." Dr. Connelly shook her head.

"I told him the truth." Louise sighed, remembering the naked look on his face at the moment when he believed her. "He took the camera because he understood the historical context."



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Books by Mary Robinette Kowal

Scenting the Dark and Other Stories
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The Hugo Award Showcase 2010 edited by Mary Robinette Kowal
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